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Supriya Baily & Maria Katradis

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"Pretty Much Fear!!" Rationalizing Teacher (Dis)Engagement in Social Justice Education

Supriya Baily and Maria Katradis

George Mason University

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how teachers in U.S. classrooms navigate, dialogue, debate, and absorb the ideas of privilege, power, and the presence of various forms of injustices. Through their understanding of these topics, we explore how K-12 teachers engage, disengage, and rationalize issues of social justice in education, society, and their own classrooms. This article utilizes teachers' dialogue through one curricular design used by a group of teacher educators to ensure safety, dialogue, and reflection. Using a grounded theory approach, we find that teachers lie on a continuum somewhere between shirking or embracing their role and responsibilities towards social justice. By highlighting K-12 teachers' understandings and positionalities regarding social justice, this study helps teacher educators charged with preparing teachers to better recognize the challenges we face in bringing social justice curricula to teacher education programs.

While there is a growing body of literature that theorizes the importance of social justice in education (Ayers, 2009; Brion-Meisels, 2009; Michie, 2009; Reynolds, 2009; Torres, 2009), there has been limited understanding of how such theory translates into practice. Researchers have tried to address how teachers engage with social justice curriculum in various forums and with various types of students (Dover, 2009; Hackman, 2005). Yet, there is very limited reflection on how teachers themselves "sit with" social justice in their own growth and development. This article analyzes how teachers in U.S. classrooms navigate, dialogue, debate, and absorb the ideas of privilege, power, and the presence of various forms of injustices particularly in their own understanding of social justice in their lives. Through their understanding of these topics during a Master's level program, we explore how K-12 teachers engage, disengage, and rationalize issues of social justice more broadly, and as a result, how concepts and ideas around social justice might unfold within their own practice.

This study documents teacher education practices utilizing systematic data collection and grounded theory to enhance our knowledge of critical social, cultural, and equity issues as they relate to U.S. classrooms. Although others have documented how teachers engage in social justice in preparation programs (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011; Taylor & Sobel, 2003), this article documents patterns in teachers' levels of comfort and discomfort outside of the K-12 classroom and their plans, or lack thereof, on how to address these issues in their K-12 classrooms. Our findings seek to present a more nuanced and iterative understanding of teachers' beliefs about engaging in social justice conversations in their own lives. These conversations have a direct connection to the ways in which teachers might approach these issues in their own classrooms. Although there are increasing pressures on schools and communities to understand the dispositions that might be needed to live in a global community, far more knowledge is needed to

CONTACT Supriya Baily sbaily@gmu.edu College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, MS 1E8, Fairfax, VA 22030.

understand how teachers personally respond to such issues. This study is equally important for teachers and teacher educators because it: (1) provides insights that educators can learn from regarding social justice education; (2) promotes a deeper understanding of issues that go beyond individual teachers' contexts and experiences; and (3) provides empirical and theoretical considerations on how discussions of social justice education can transfer from the teacher education classroom to K-12 classrooms.

Background and context

Teacher education programs have tried to prepare teachers to better understand the diversity of U.S. classrooms through a variety of mechanisms including, but not limited to, providing experiences to work with diverse student populations and coursework that prepares teachers for various classroom contexts. More recently, such experiences are being mandated through accreditation standards (Olstad, Foster, & Wyman, 1983). According to Lunenberg (2010), teacher educators are the most important factors in educational reforms as they are often the ones who charge teachers not only to understand diversity in more complex ways, but also provide evidence on these issues in accreditation materials and comply with new regulations and laws. However, the expectation that teacher educators teach through and for social justice is not a universal reality. The prospect that social justice actions emerge naturally for teachers is under critique and often depends on a teacher's individual desire for justice and equity (Shaklee & Baily, 2012). Teachers cannot teach what they do not know and often struggle to understand differences, especially those that that go beyond race and ethnicity such as topics that are related to home language differences, gender identity, sexuality, and social and economic injustices.

But how does one do this? What tools exist for teacher educators to move beyond a cursory introduction to the issues of injustice in society? How can they assist prospective teachers to find the time, space, and courage to engage in a reflexive process to see themselves clearly? Twenty years ago, Hoffman (1996) stated that for multicultural education to be more reflexive, we must evolve to the point where the "development of knowledge [would include] more socio-centric, flexible, and layered visions; … an openness to seeing these other ways and values as a potential source of learning rather than as … different, or … as a threat to oneself" (p. 564). The challenge has been articulated by other scholars (Brion-Meisels, 2009; Richert, Donahue, & LaBoskey, 2009) and continues to be an urgent matter to be addressed by teacher educators.

In this article, we find that teachers lie on a continuum somewhere between denying and embracing their role in, and responsibilities towards social justice. This pattern of rocking back and forth between comfort and discomfort is exhibited through the dialogue and engagement participants display when confronted with complicated issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Perspectives

This article has been influenced largely by two bodies of literature that discuss, respectively, the challenges in developing social justice curricula for both preservice and inservice teachers, and the ways in which such curricula informs teachers' beliefs while transforming their thinking. In this article, we use the term "social justice in education" to describe the ways in which teachers view the role of justice or injustice in schools and we use the term "social justice education" to describe the curricula teacher educators use to prompt teachers to engage in reflection on social justice in schools.

Social justice in teacher education

In a standards-based education system, the focus is on preparing teachers to handle the immediate and explicit needs of a classroom. Teachers often lack the time to "better understand the various 'truths' that exist and [to] better recognize their own responsibility toward sharing multiple perspectives with their students" (Baily, Stribling, & McGowan, 2014, p. 257). Furthermore, the lack of diversity in both the teacher corps and among teacher educators, and the inability to move beyond theorizing on social justice issues often hinder the use of social justice curricula in teacher education programs.

The lack of diversity within the teaching force is one critical component in understanding the role of injustice in society. Richert, Donahue, and LasBoskey (2009) suggest that one reason children of color are left behind is because "white teachers do not adequately understand the experiences, perspectives, and learning needs of children whose racial and ethnic backgrounds are different from their own" (p. 642). They state (Richert et al., 2009) that to teach about race and racism, white teachers need to understand the pervasiveness of the issues and understand their own identity development and experiences as well as those of people of color. This permeates into the practices of teacher educators as well who, although also are predominantly white, struggle to engage students in critical reflections on cultural differences (Grant & Gillette, 2006). Quaye's (2012) case study of white faculty members demonstrates the difficulties faculty face when confronting issues of race in their own higher education classrooms. Quaye (2012) found that white faculty members needed to learn how to have these critical conversations in their classrooms, as faculty of color are often underrepresented in higher education.

Due to the homogeneity of education, it becomes challenging for preservice and in-service teachers to truly find a way to debate the difficult issues that lie at the heart of social justice. It becomes safer to focus on strategies, content, and discipline in an effort to keep from having teachers and teacher educators encounter their own understandings of power, privilege and injustice. The narrow conceptualization of teaching limits the opportunities for teachers to be "relevant, purposeful, collaborative, democratic, and oriented toward social justice and equity" (Wiedeman, 2002, p. 205). Furthermore, Wiedeman (2002) suggests that "reform efforts … be guided by two critical concerns in order to achieve democratic principles of justice and equity in teacher preparation" (p. 205). The first, she posits is a need for more inclusive and flexible pedagogy, and the second is an explicit philosophy of social justice in teacher education (Wiedeman, 2002).

Wiedeman's (2002) argument reiterates what scholars such as Cochran-Smith, Darling-Hammond, Nieto, and others have long-defended. Teachers need to view themselves as professionals with the power to become agents of change; developing a critical stance towards such a position is often difficult in the wake of the current teaching climate (Baily, Stribling, & McGowan, 2014). In our experiences as teacher educators, two challenges lie at the forefront. First, there are many silos—including race, class, economics, culture, nationality, ability, gender, and sexuality—for teacher educators to navigate in building a socially-just teacher preparation program. The second challenge is the frequent inability to move from theory to action on social justice curricula. In order to do so, teacher education programs need to help teachers develop this professionalized view of themselves through a constructive and critical lens that will allow them to enact change in the lives of their students. Demulder, Ndura-Ouédraogo, and Stribling (2009) support this debate in trying to answer a constant refrain from teachers—"how can we do this in our classrooms?"—by saying:

> While this question may sometimes be interpreted by teacher educators as reflecting a rather simplistic view of teacher education courses and programs as merely tool-kit providers, such a question relates a valid concern that much of the diversity-related instruction amounts to nothing more than a theoretical exploration of idealistic concepts without much application to the classroom. (p. 32)

As a result, the development of such pedagogy for teacher educators becomes challenging as well. Milner (2006) finds that when candidates enter teacher education programs, their overall system of beliefs and attitudes, as well as their understanding of the teaching and learning process, both need to be addressed, as all of these factors address how candidates teach, develop curricula, and engage in instruction. This is especially important as the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of a relatively homogenous teaching force are often exceedingly different from those of their students.

McDonald (2008) finds that assignments in teacher education programs that focus on social justice either draw on individual notions of justice or on the sociopolitical context of schooling, and oftentimes the impact of such assignments depend directly on the individual field experiences. Teachers must "model acceptance and respect … become cultural border-crossers [and] create humanizing educational environments in their classrooms" (Demulder, Ndura-Ouédraogo, & Stribling, 2009, p. 32); we argue

that this is the same for teacher educators. Although the challenge of how teacher educators build curricula remains, we are concerned with both the development of curricula and how teachers transform themselves in response to such curricula.

Teacher transformation

The second component of our conceptual framework centers on the notions of teacher transformation and teacher beliefs in relation to social justice curricula in education. Teacher beliefs about teaching and the role of education have been shown to be more static than fluid, and beliefs about teaching are often fully developed by the time a student enters college (Pajares, 1992). Changing teacher beliefs is difficult, as teachers may maintain beliefs that are contrary to their experiences and everyday realities as a teacher. Teacher beliefs often filter, frame, and guide a teacher's experience (Fives & Buehl, 2012), which means that teachers bring at least 12 years' worth of beliefs about schooling with them into the college classroom. Many preservice teachers enter teacher preparation programs with limited knowledge and understanding of their own cultural history, and tend to maintain a strong belief in the vision of successful individualism and the importance of hard work and effort in positive results (Wubbels, 2010). Thus, inservice teachers add justifications for their beliefs from experiences within their schools and classrooms (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

In order for teacher education to transform teachers' beliefs, coursework should help teacher candidates unwrap their experiences and understandings of teaching—their motivations, models, and aspirations—before they begin teaching. For in-service teachers, the process of unpacking beliefs becomes more complicated as experiences in individual school cultures often frame the way a teacher thinks about her or his position. Teacher talk (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Gill & Hoffman, 2009; Pollack, 2013) often is used to capture teachers' beliefs and make the implicit explicit through analysis and discussion. Communities of practice consisting of like-minded teachers may help support teachers in their ongoing development. In 2004, Berger elaborated on the idea of "the growing edge" which builds on Hoffman's (1996) charge that social justice education requires greater reflexivity among teachers. The theory of the growing edge (Berger, 2004) describes the tangible nature of transformational reflection and presents the boundaries of reflection "that takes us to the edge of our meaning" (p. 338). Berger struggled to understand how transformation occurred as teachers "read texts that unsettle them, focus on conversations that failed, and unpack their assumptions about students, parents, and communities" (Berger, 2004, p. 337). Her hypothesis was that teachers approached, needed company, and felt discomfort at the growing edge, and in order to engage them, their facilitator had to be aware that they would struggle and would, oftentimes, be tempted to shy away. Berger believed that this was where reflection had the power to transform and to "move outside the form of current understanding and into a new place" (2004, p. 338). By providing this space, "the growing edge [would become] its own teacher" (Berger, 2004, p. 345), challenging teachers to critically question their responsibilities (Baily, Stribling, & McGowan, 2014).

The trouble is that practical solutions are limited and theoretical explorations into such issues do little more than extol the virtues of social justice topics. The expectations of what is needed, do not usually come with instructions on how to do such work. How do we support teachers in examining the privilege (or lack thereof) of their race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, class, and education while preparing them to teach students, not only for the diversity currently present in their classrooms, but also for the diversity of their futures? How do teachers name their challenges? How can our understanding of those challenges move us from theory to action?

Methods

Grounded theory offers researchers a chance to look creatively at data to construct systematic forms of knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). One of the authors of this article was a faculty member in a cohort-based graduate program, and the data collected for this article emerged from a six-week class assignment embedded within a 24-month graduate program. Developed for practicing, in-service, P-12 teachers of all content areas, faculty in this program modeled the collaborative process by working

in teams to co-plan and co-teach the 30-credit, 2-year program. Central components of the program included critical reflection, action research, transformative learning, and language and culture. Over the two years, cohorts were able to develop long-term relationships through a safe environment and curriculum that addressed issues of power, privilege, social justice, and diversity. The cohort in the present study consisted of 58 students who had been together for 18 months when this activity began. In groups of six, teachers participated in an online discussion board. Using a number of readings for prompts, teachers posted their thoughts and responded to others between two and three times per week. The readings consisted of a series of *New York Times* articles addressing social injustices in the U.S. along with selected chapters and articles. The teachers were expected to post twice a week for 12 weeks (this discussion lasted 6 out of 12 weeks). They were expected to post in a candid and direct fashion, as the program spent the previous 12 months working to create a trusting environment through other curricular activities. The content of their postings was not graded. Faculty did not engage in the online dialogue, and although the teachers were aware that the posts were reviewed and could potentially be used for research purposes, the faculty did not intrude on the online environment as they did not want to change the dynamic of the conversation. Thus, this study serves as a snapshot of the programmatic outcomes of participating in this cohort, the specific course itself, and the way teachers imagined and reimagined their roles towards social justice. There was no initial research question to the analysis of the posts, merely a desire to engage students in a difficult and moving dialogue on issues of justice and equity. Upon the completion of the online-posting exercise, it became apparent that systematic study might offer insights into teacher perspectives on these topics. The researchers read the data transcripts multiple times and found that over the six weeks there were approximately 960 substantial[1] postings. These topics focused on power and privilege, and the researchers started to gather codes from each week and created organizational themes around particular concepts that formed the foundation of our theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This is central to the ways in which grounded theory works and, in our reading of the data, we each identified patterns that presented a theory that drove our further analysis. The theory we were seeing highlighted the back and forth nature of how the teachers spoke of social justice issues. As we highlight in the analysis section of this article, there was consistent engagement and disengagement with the material, an illustration we saw in the saying, "two steps forward, one step back."

Certain limitations exist in this study as we deal with the reactions of individual teachers to specific readings and to each other in a setting designed to push the teachers to challenge their understandings and notions of difference. Had the participants chosen not to be as open about their own experiences, the way they reacted to one another also may have been different, yielding different results. Researcher positionality also may have played a role in the theory generated through this data analysis. Although one researcher was intimately aware of and involved in the selection and teaching of the materials, the other researcher was new to the data. Thus, regular meetings, discussions, and memo writing (Maxwell, 2005) throughout the data analysis process were vital to this study.

Furthermore, future research using the same data could include discourse analysis to deconstruct teachers' statements as a way to further unpack teachers' explicit and implicit beliefs regarding differences as expressed in teacher education programs. Additionally, the data for this study were collected through a self-report and reflective discussion group exercise. Examining teacher talk within the teachers' classrooms would have further illuminated the implications of their participation on their classroom environment and how they envision their responsibility toward social justice in their own classrooms.

Findings

In our analysis, we found that teachers interacted with the concepts presented in the readings in ways that highlighted both their engagement and disengagement with their roles and responsibilities as they related to social justice in education. Discussions supported the ongoing juxtaposition of what teachers believed was right with what they saw as reality. There was regular shifting back and forth about how and where conversations on injustice belonged in schools, the existence of difference in society, and the role of

power and privilege in education. Additionally, there was evidence of further shifts in thinking between teachers' implicit and explicit understandings of the "Other" as it pertained to their own experiences within and outside of their school community. Themes layered within this broader notion of engagement and disengagement include retreating from conversations on race and class in the interest of protecting the child, assumptions embedded in addressing difference, and the implicit and explicit exercise of power and privilege by teachers.

Protecting the child

Early in the discussion forums, the idea of protecting the child emerged as a notion that resonated with the teachers, in part perhaps due to the underlying belief that adults protected children or that teachers might need to shield children from unpleasantness. Initially, respondents indicated that race and racism should not be addressed or discussed because the children do not understand these topics. One teacher declared, "I wouldn't even begin to talk about it in my classroom—they are too young anyways to really understand it" (Group A9, C4).[2]

This statement problematizes the innocence of students and the role of the teacher. Explicitly, by not addressing racism due to this perceived innocence of students, this teacher exhibits the belief that her students cannot understand what racism is and how it functions in society. This is contrary to prominent literature that illustrates that children as young as six months are able recognize and judge differences in race (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). While young children are able to recognize and feel injustice, they do not have the vocabulary to support their learned values and experiences (Leistyna, 2009). Chomsky (1999, as cited in Leistyna, 1999) suggests that as early as kindergarten, children are taught not to question their environments and classrooms and to align with the way adults accept (and maintain) their surrounding environments and their relationships to already existing power structures. Thus, even young students are able to recognize injustices as part of the social order and are systematically taught to accept these through schooling.

Despite what we know about children and their perceptions of inequity, another group (A9) also centered a conversation on the innocence of the child with one participant stating:

> I don't think racism is something we should even teach about … why give our students the idea of something they don't even know about … the kids are going to learn this on their own or from the actions of their parents. (Group A9, C4)

In this very brief statement, the participant highlights the belief that the role of the teacher is not to expose, discuss, and critically reflect on the social issues and injustices caused by, in this instance, racism in our society. Furthermore, the responsibility of the teacher to conduct such conversations reverts to an explicit rationalization to protect and shield students as well as an implicit rationalization intended to possibly protect the teachers themselves. Additionally, the comment about children learning this on their own or within their own family negates the teachers' understanding of their power to impact children's understandings of these issues in school.

Throughout this discussion, another refrain was the level of blame teachers placed on parents for racist tendencies and attitudes. The teachers often referenced home and family situations as the space within with which injustice in society is manifested. Such beliefs on the part of the teachers ignore the structural, social, political, and economic forces that create, sustain, and entrench injustice in society. While singularly blaming parents offers teachers a "bye," it illuminates, among other ideas, the lack of understanding teachers have about issues of injustice in society or their unwillingness to tackle such topics in their classrooms. This brings into question the role and position of the teacher in the classroom and the preparation of teachers to address these issues. This is clearly articulated in the following quotes, where one teacher states personal discomfort with the topic on three separate occasions. The first post stated:

> So I want to start by saying this is not an easy subject for me to post on at all. Racism is something I am very uncomfortable with and is something I have very little experience or even response too … I understand that we all need to be accepting and our world is diverse. Although I also understand racism will always be around. I just don't

> think it's necessary to have kids at age 3 introduced to racism in order for our country to change. I don't see that as an answer—although I don't know one either. (Group A9, C1)

The second:

> I am not scared to teach racism I am scared of the backlash and the misunderstanding from people which is why I wouldn't even begin to talk about it in in my classroom—they are too young anyways to REALLY understand it. (Group A9, C3; emphasis in the original)

Finally:

> Kids parents are the ones who teach their kids about everything in this category. I think teachers try and stay away from this topic. I also think we stay away for the wrong reasons—we are in reality only human and do not want to offend anyone. WE are scared of the backlash which is a reality … I think they need multiple opinions and views on these things not just ones from their parents … There are multiple views for everything and we gather from all of those to make our personal opinions. (Group A9, C3; emphasis in the original)

In these three quotes, the participant's responses include varying levels of exposure to the topic of racism, an unwillingness to teach about racism, and finally an admitted lack of preparation to properly teach about racism. In this participant's view, it is necessary for teachers to expose students to varying views so that they learn from others, not just their parents, although this participant seems unaware of how to do that.

While there were more conversations that centered on wanting to protect children and the need for such conversations to happen at home, one group (A6) emphatically claimed that teachers and schools do matter in transcending the inequalities of society with teachers sharing that

> so much of what kids learn about differences CAN be taught at school … When I first started teaching, I thought students were "colorblind" too. I quickly realized that, as fast as they could point out differences in eye color or gender, they SAW differences in each other, too … I often give students opportunities to share about themselves and their cultures. At first I did this so they could appreciate their differences, but I soon found out this was a great way to show students how alike they are. (Group A6; emphasis in the original)

While this participant does maintain a surface level understanding of the topic, there is a greater sense of responsibility on the part of the teacher to address difference. What is left unsaid is how this teacher would handle more sensitive topics or move beyond the basic recognition of difference. Hinshaw (2007) suggests that it is critical for compassion to be a central component of teaching about social justice issues but, in many cases, the teachers' compassion for their students misplaces their understanding of compassion for the world in which the students live. This perceived compassion for students protects the teachers, but also ensures a clear justification for why they do not feel obligated to bring up issues of injustice in their classrooms.

Addressing race in the classroom

If one reason to step away from addressing social justice issues in a classroom is to protect children, another theme that strongly resonated with the groups was the apparent inability for teachers to believe that students saw differences among themselves. Although color was not the only marker of difference, it seemed to be the one that was most often discussed. For instance, in some conversations, a students' color was discussed extensively, but a clear distinction was made between identifying race as a color of skin and discriminating against race. One participant mentioned a recent discussion with a colleague on whether students distinguish between races. "I said something like … kids don't see a difference. She said that she thinks they definitely see a difference, they just don't see it as being a good or bad thing" (Group A6, C4). In response, another participant agreed: "I think what you said is true. They don't see differences as being a bad thing, but I also don't think that they don't always recognize their differences" (Group A6, C4).

As in the previous section, the conversations highlighted personal discomfort on the part of teachers in addressing race with their students (and even within their groups), but in this case the participants were willing to explore the nature of discrimination and how it is addressed in the classroom.

> I absolutely do not allow racism to go unaddressed in my classroom but I do believe giving students an opportunity to discuss and vocalize racist points of views does open up an opportunity to address them as long as it's done responsibly. (Group A7, C3)

Although the participants were likely comfortable in addressing race in the context of their students' interactions, they seemed less comfortable in addressing race with their colleagues and other adults. However, they seemed to have a level of comfort with speaking honestly with each other about their discomfort with the way race was addressed in society. Group A0 questioned why white people are uncomfortable talking about race in general and highlighted the differing perceptions of whites versus blacks discussing issues of race:

> One of the questions we had to answer during the in-service was what was our first encounter with racism and I was shocked at the number of teachers who said they had never encountered, witnessed nor been a part of any type of racism. The majority of the teachers were white and my age or older. So I guess that's why I found it difficult to believe that according to them, racism never existed. It seemed that they were in denial. (Group A0, C1)

In response to this question, a black participant (as identified through the response) stated:

> I have noticed, too … that some white people avoid racial conversations. I think they do it, though because of the sensitivity of minorities, especially blacks …When a white person says anything that is even close to being racial, it is jumped on by blacks. However, blacks can say anything they want and feel it's justified because of what happened years ago (slavery, segregation, etc.). Think about all the things that are labeled "black or african american" versus the things that are labeled white. There is no white history month, but there is a black one. There are no labeled, historically white colleges, but we have HBCUs [historically black colleges and universities]. WE have the NAACP, the United Negro College Fund, and a lot more. How many things do whites have, publicly/openly as blacks? … I believe racism still exists, but if we want all people to discuss their feelings, they have to feel comfortable speaking what they feel is the truth, without being ridiculed. (Group A0, C1; emphasis in the original)

Even if the teachers did not completely buy into the perspective that they did not see difference, they believed that their students indeed were not able to see color. One participant reflected on this with regard to children and their lack of filters stating, "We as adults, generally, use the same practices for certain aspects of our lives. The only difference is we have been living long enough to come up with satisfying justifications in our mind" (Group A0, B2). Here we see how the way that the explicit dispositions of children toward "others" built upon their relationships with adults, have evolved into implicit beliefs of adults who have used their experiences to create justifications for their beliefs. However, the role of teachers and schools in preventing the perpetuation of othering was not discussed, leaving many more unresolved questions regarding the purpose of schooling.

Along with this theme is the assumption of sameness. One respondent refused the notion that white or middle class teachers should alter what they do in their classrooms depending on their audience:

> I don't think that white or middle class teachers need to do anything differently to understand the cultural histories or struggles of students with color. I don't care what color the students are, there are struggles in every family. I think it all comes down to just being a good teacher and being understanding, period. If you genuinely love being with your students, you're going to help them in some way because they'll be open to you. Yes, it requires us to put aside our own experiences … but aren't we there to give them the same opportunities at school? (Group A2, C9)

More specifically, this respondent believes that everyone's experiences are left at the door, including those of the teacher, which is counter to prevalent theories in education that promote holistic approaches to teaching children. Without a critical examination of teachers' experiences and how those experiences influence their actions in the classroom, it may not be enough for teachers to discuss inequalities and their effects on education as this could lead to a misunderstanding of teachers' power and privilege in the classroom.

Power and privilege within the structures of school

Another theme that emerged was an understanding, or lack thereof, of the teacher's own privilege and power within the structures of school, and their role in othering, or treating students differently from others. One group (A6) problematized the ways in which students' test scores were collected as data and

analyzed according to race and SES. One teacher stated: "When I see how students are being analyzed and grouped, I am wondering if segregation is really dead" (Group A6, C4). Group A6 concluded that identifying differences is not the same as valuing differences. One respondent described a black student not identifying another student as black and her shock as a teacher that the students did not identify each other as such. While the teachers discussed the value of colorblindness extensively, they continued to assign labels to students, regardless of how the student would personally identify him- or herself. This supports the teachers' own exercise of power, in being able to make a decision for a student. For instance:

> Another issue we discuss is segregation. The kids have a really tough time understanding that our class would all be divided up and most of my kids would never get to be in my class if there was still segregation. One year though, there was a black student who looked around the classroom (my class was mostly hispanic and a few other races, but mainly hispanic) and said, "So I wouldn't be allowed to be in class with any of you?" Then, another black student spoke up and said, "No, I'd be in your class." "No you wouldn't; I'm black." "So am I." It was a really weird thing to witness. (Group A6, C4)

Teachers still have a great deal of power in how they identify, label, and group students yet this was not often examined or questioned by other discussants. One participant changed the conversation from the students recognizing and discussing race to the effect of collecting subgroup data on teachers and expectations in the classroom as an extension of how systems group students by color:

> I hate the subgroups data that I have to do! I think that in a way, administration is reinforcing stereotypes. At my school we have to do subgroup data on our Hispanic, ESL[3], SpEd[4], and Black students. We are keeping tabs on those subgroups because we expect them to struggle. Haven't we learned that expectations can affect behaviors, even subconsciously? We are always told to have high expectations for all students, so how does this classroom practice fit into it all? … It is all a numbers game that is having some strange consequences. I would never look at my subgroup data and say, "Wow, I really need to pull my black students to the back table for remediation." So why do I need to group them that way in my data? (Group A6, C4)

A few respondents also recognized and described their position as teachers of privilege that exert power over their students using this privilege. Group A3 concluded their discussion with an increased awareness of what occurs in their classrooms based on their personal experiences as both students and teachers. However, their discussion described exerting power over their students within their classrooms as a way to help students overcome the power from outside of their classrooms, specifically from their families. One respondent said, "I can't help change the culture of a family but maybe now I can find ways to help these kids" (Group A3). The role of the teacher in this statement is to exert power to correct and help the children of other cultures, not to identify and overcome differences, does not present a critical examination of the multiple cultures present in the relationships.

Furthermore, Group A7 discussed teachers' indifference to issues and unwillingness to stand up for things even when they know they are right. One teacher described an evolved view of being a bystander:

> I never thought of being silent or neutral [a]s a bad thing in situations. I now have a different approach to being silent or neutral. I used to think if I didn't say anything or give my opinion I was s[t]aying out of the situation because I didn't want to be involved or hurt anyone's feelings … If I would've opened my mouth and said how I felt, I could have saved someone or have helped find a solution to a problem … I now can say when there is an issue, I have to put my own fears to the side and do the right thing no matter what. (Group A7, C5)

A number of group members also agreed with this statement and admitted that although they had not done so in the past, they reiterated their belief that it was time for them to begin to stand up for their students and others. One respondent described weighing the costs or consequences of addressing students' issues with the way some colleagues have treated them, specifically by potentially "sticking [one's] neck out and … offending others in the school" who are one's friends. Teachers have the power to make a difference in a student's life, in their relationship with minority and dominant cultures, and with education in general, yet their power is overwhelmed by fear, as one respondent indicated in reference to students:

> Often times our students are not willing to take a stand for many of the same reasons most people don't—fear of rejection, fear of persecution, fear of being different, fear of alienation … pretty much fear!!! [sic] … I hope that

> my students build their courage to do the same thing and I try, through modeling my behavior in the classroom and out to help my students receive an example of how to do just that. (Group A7, C5)

In this discussion, one's power as a teacher can be used to address both the power and privilege of being a teacher of the dominant culture. The role of the teacher is seen as a model for students. Therefore, whether a teacher prevents or perpetuates injustices within the school is just as important as the interaction she or he has with individual students. The fear participants refer to stems from a lack of preparation to confront such topics of differences in their classrooms. This indicates that teacher education programs need to encourage teachers to have difficult conversations during their preservice and in-service teacher development, in order to confront challenges in their classrooms and schools.

Lessons learned

From our data, we can strongly say that teachers think and are often willing to talk about inequity. They remember incidents in their classrooms where they were unprepared and hesitant to take on problematic social issues. The forces of justice and injustice exist in the context of schools, and as teachers reflect on their experiences, as our data shows, they often found themselves lacking an awareness of how to handle themselves and provide knowledge, support, and guidance to their students. Returning to Berger's (2004) concept of the growing edge, we found that teachers were willing to take steps to explore critical social issues, engage in supportive dialogue, and feel discomfort at the edge. We also saw the nonlinear progression through this conversation, where individual participants began by making broad and general statements without much reflection. Through the trust created by the "third space" (Wright, 2012), they tested their own understandings, questioned and reflected on others' responses, and in the process, seemed to make their implicit beliefs explicit.

The patterns we identified most frequently showed a backward and forward momentum on implicit and explicit beliefs, what we are hypothesizing as a Z-wave. Although their understandings evolved, this occurred in a staggered continuum rather similar to the notion of "two steps forward, one step back." Participants seemed willing and wanting to talk about these topics, but they didn't even know where to start or how to identify their beliefs. Each week, participants would make a hesitant statement, revise their statements through discussion, revisit an experience, and revise their statements yet again (two steps forward). However, at the beginning of each discussion, their statements were one step back from their revised statements of the previous discussion. Thus, if we were to map their trajectories from the first discussion to the last, the participants made positive movement towards recognizing, understanding, and addressing inequalities and prejudice in their classrooms. However, on a weekly basis, they positively moved forward and then returned to a place of hesitance or purposeful ignorance that was slightly removed from their starting point the week before (see Figure 1).

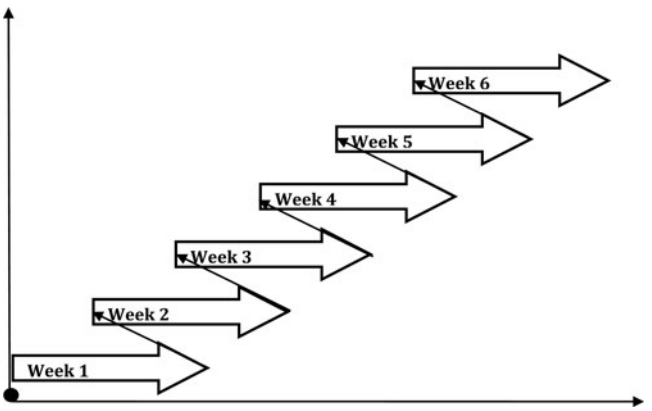

Figure 1. Z-wave.

For example, one participant initially had difficulty recognizing prejudice in her own life. Her initial responses were very vague, but once she responded to another participant, she began to redefine diversity and prejudice in a way that allowed her to critically examine how she was treated and how she felt, as a student, as the only religious minority in her school. This allowed her to share her own experience, to broaden the definition of diversity to include religion, and to examine how her treatment could have been more positive had her teachers and classmates been aware of the ways in which they could have accommodated and included her in the general culture. Each week, however, this participant would begin the discussion from a place of hesitance, despite having been profoundly moved by the previous weeks' discussions. This pattern was repeated by other participants as well.

In moving along the Z-wave, participants in this study also moved between shirking and embracing their roles and responsibilities towards social justice as teachers. In this study, teacher talk was captured through online discussions about issues of injustice, thus allowing their implicit beliefs to become explicit while sharing their understandings of these topics. The vast majority of the readings, although dealing with injustices in society at large, did not directly address injustices in education. However, it was clear that the participants sought to create links to education, as participants' responses to the readings continuously brought the discussion back to the classroom, their experiences as K-12 students, their positions as teachers, and their life experiences with injustices. The growing edge is illustrated in the evolution of participants' interactions and subsequent understandings they were able to arrive at with their colleagues in small groups. Their need to link the readings and their discussions back to educational settings and their own roles as teachers indicates the need to have these discussions in order to allow the growing edge to grow a bit further. Additionally, exploring teacher talk in participants' classrooms may help teachers identify their implicit beliefs regarding differences, and how such differences influence their classroom interactions. A number of participants discussed teacher talk and how what a teacher says can have a powerful positive or negative impact on a student. Having a researcher document teacher talk may help to highlight teachers' implicit beliefs and experiences with difference in their individual classrooms, which may not have otherwise been explicit.

Similar to McDonald's (2008) findings on teacher education curricula, participants in this study often were able to discuss concepts of injustice more critically if they had some personal experience with similar injustices (racism, xenophobia, othering). Thus, although the groups and cohort as a whole discussed these issues, only individuals who had firsthand experience with the injustices in school settings were able to critically reflect on how to address similar issues with their own students. Likewise, teachers who teach in settings that are predominantly one race were unable to relate to or distinguish their own privilege and class in the classroom setting. The question for us then becomes, how can teacher education help teachers who have not had firsthand experiences address these topics through their teaching and in their schools? If they don't have to think about these issues, do these issues exist? The teachers' lack of surety of whose job it was to discuss these topics—parents, teachers, or society in general—allowed many teachers to blame someone else for the way their students and (future) adults think and act.

Wiedeman (2002), in discussing Nieto (2000), suggests five specific ways teacher educators can place equity at the center of teacher education programs: (1) take a stand on social justice and diversity; (2) make social justice ubiquitous in teacher education; (3) promote teaching as an ongoing process of transformation; (4) learn to challenge racism and bias; and (5) develop a community of critical friends (Nieto, 2000, pp. 182–183, as cited in Wiedeman, 2002, p. 206). This present study took place at a college of education that considers social justice a central value. An integral component of the program through which the curriculum was offered is to engage actively with social justice issues. By participating in a cohort environment, participants created and developed a community of critical friends. However, after analyzing this data, we now see that items 3 and 4 from Nieto's list, above, need to be developed more through the program curricula. Teacher education research shows that promoting teaching as an ongoing process of transformation and learning to challenge racism and bias are difficult to do. How can we get participants to continue to transform their teaching and challenge themselves and others against racism and bias?

Demulder et al. (2009) introduce a process of teacher transformation that included three phases: "learning about self, learning about other, and learning to take action" (p. 44). They concluded that all

three phases are "necessary to support professional development, but the ultimate emphasis on action is crucial if change is to occur" (Demulder et al., 2009, p. 44). This is evident in the present study, where teachers in a Master's program learned about themselves, others, and their classrooms. However, the action phase is not examined in this study as the teachers, and their teacher talk, were not observed in their individual classrooms.

Thus, teacher education must create opportunities for such dialogues to occur, following the teacher from teacher education to the classroom, as the perpetual motion back and forth is the only way for teachers to get over their fear of speaking up, their fear of standing up for what is socially just, and their fear of engaging students in critical social justice discourse. Analyzing teacher talk becomes a powerful tool to engage teachers and teacher educators in this process, by taking teachers from rationalizing their disengagement in social justice education to rationalizing their engagement in social justice education.

We would argue that Hoffman's (1996) call for multicultural education should be more reflexive, include social justice education, and evolve to integrate knowledge of and experiences with others' values and ways of being in teacher education. Our argument here is that this cannot be done in one course or one module, but rather must occur in a cyclical and iterative process that offers dialogue, debate, and description in an effort to engage teachers in an authentic manner. We believe it is important to see how teachers think when it comes to social justice issues, so that their windows into those ideas can broaden the scope of action to build depth and nuance for teacher educators who seek to engage this domain.

Notes

1. Substantial signifying postings that furthered the discussion of the selected topic, and moved beyond "I agree" or supportive statements.
2. To protect the teachers participating in the study, both the discussion group they belonged to, the reading they were discussing, and their names have been changed based on a formula that prevents linking the two together. The coding on the quotes used in this article reflect the group and reading numbers and reflect different participants within the groups, unless otherwise noted.
3. ESL refers to English as a Second Language.
4. SpEd refers to Special Education.

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Notes on contributors

Supriya Baily is an associate professor in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. Her research interests include gender and power relations, social justice issues in international education, and teacher agency and leadership.

Maria Katradis is a PhD candidate in education at George Mason University. Her dissertation research is focused on teachers', students', and parents' beliefs about language learning in Modern Greek language programs at the elementary school level in the United States.